

Although I am one of the youngest Members of the Senate, I grew up in Helena, Arkansas during what seemed to be a much simpler time—even though we were in the height of de-segregation in the South.

Our parents pulled together to make everyone's education experience a success. Students came to school prepared to learn. Teachers had control of their classroom. The threat of school violence was virtually non-existent.

Now, more than twenty years later, things are different.

Our children are subjected to unprecedented social stresses including divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, poverty and an explosion of technology that has good and bad uses.

These stresses exhibit themselves in the behavior of teenagers, as well as in our young children. Increasingly, elementary school children exhibit symptoms of substance abuse, academic underachievement, disruptive behavior, and even suicide.

Too many students bring guns and weapons to school.

This is a very complex problem and there is no one single answer. It will take more than metal detectors and surveillance cameras to prevent the tragedies occurring in our schools today. But we must do something. We cannot wait any longer. We have to address this issue now.

I believe the Safe Schools Act reflects the needs and wishes of students, parents, teachers and school administrators. It is the first step toward addressing the emotional well-being of our young people.

During my Senate campaign last year, I spent a lot of time listening to parents and teachers. From my experience, a lot of the most effective solutions being at the local level.

This bill incorporates the lessons I have learned from the people of my state who are working on the front lines to educate and care for our children.

First, this bill would provide funds to elementary and secondary schools to hire additional mental health professionals.

Students today bring more to school than backpacks and lunchboxes. Many of them bring severe emotional troubles.

It is critical that schools be able to help these students and help teachers deal with them. We can possibly prevent a horrific act of violence, and if a disruptive student receives help, his or her teacher will have more control of the classroom in order to instruct all of the children there to learn.

Unfortunately, there are not nearly enough mental health professionals working in our nation's schools today.

The American School Health Association recommends that the student-to-counselor ratio be 250:1. In secondary schools, the current ratio is

513:1. In elementary schools, where the student-to-teacher ratio exceeds 1000:1.

This is just not acceptable for a country as advanced as ours to not be providing the needs of our children.

The second major component of my Safe Schools Act provides funding for after-school and mentoring programs.

Many of our children go home to empty houses or spend hours every day in poorly supervised settings. Studies show that youth crime peaks between 3:00 and 7:00 p.m.

Local public schools need additional resources so they can establish or expand after school and summer programs for children.

This is a wonderful chance for the community to get involved. Many non-profit organizations can bring their resources to children in the schools and to the community.

A variety of organizations can come together to build strong after school and summer programs which enhance the academic work of students and provide them with other meaningful activities.

Many communities in Arkansas are doing just that.

The city of Fort Smith has begun the SPICE Program, which has been working for nine years with adult tutors who help kids after-school with homework, and teach them arts and crafts which keep them out of trouble.

In Little Rock, the Camp Aldersgate Youth Initiative encourages teenagers to participate in supervised community service activities, such as tutoring, recreation and conflict management;

The Safe Jonesboro Mentoring Program in Jonesboro, Arkansas, brings adults from the local business community to Jonesboro High School once a week to mentor high school student.

And these programs are not just being put into place in our larger towns, they're also cropping up in rural communities.

In Monticello and six counties throughout Southeast Arkansas, the Southeast Arkansas Foster Grandparents Program has helped improve literacy and reading test scores for hundreds of children. In this program, senior citizens serve as literacy and reading tours to K-3 elementary school students twenty hours a week.

The Boys, Girls and Adults Community Development Center in Marvell, a Save the Children grantee, has been providing educational, cultural and recreational activities, as well as mentoring for children after school. 60% of the children participating in this program have improved their grade point average. It works.

Studies show that one-on-one attention raises the academic scores of children and improves their self-esteem. With just a little extra help, a child who is struggling with reading or math can catch up with the help of volunteers or mentors and excel.

We can utilize organizations like AmeriCorps and our older volunteers in the Senior Corps program. Encourage high school students to mentor elementary school students who need a little extra attention, to see an older peer being a part of their life makes a difference.

The bottom line is we don't need to reinvent the wheel. Good examples already exist in our communities, initiatives like the ones I've mentioned today. By providing added resources to the states, we can emphasize the successful programs and make them available to more students.

I'm also asking states to inform parents about the quality of public schools by issuing a Safe Schools Report Card. My own state of Arkansas will begin releasing a more comprehensive report card next year.

All states should collect this information and make it readily available to parents and the community. This information will help parents and schools officials better address the most important issues at the local level.

Above all, we must continue to share information and ideas, to talk to one another. Our country cannot possibly meet the challenges of the 21st century if each community operates in a vacuum and there is no mechanism to pass on what is working and what isn't.

During the August recess I will hold five "Back to School" meetings with students, parents, teachers, school administrators and concerned citizens.

These meetings will be a good chance to discuss the various components of my Safe Schools Act as well as other important education issues like school construction, class size, school discipline and parent involvement.

I welcome the chance to listen to those who care deeply about our public schools and I hope my colleagues will spend some of their time during the recess to do the same.

I also hope my colleagues will take the opportunity to review the components of this bill. I feel strongly it should be a critical part of any federal response to school safety issues. I look forward to its passage.

This is our opportunity to begin the process that will show our children we do care about their emotional well being and the future success of our nation.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Who seeks recognition?

The Senator from Wyoming.

PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, first of all, I ask unanimous consent that Brady Hayek from my staff be permitted the privilege of the floor during today.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.